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An invitation for more research on transnational corporations and the biosphere

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We welcome the interest in our work on transnational corporations (TNCs) and biosphere stewardship. TNCs have rarely been linked to ecosystem dynamics, and even less so considered suitable partners for knowledge co-production in sustainability research. How TNCs shape the intertwined nature of people and planet represents therefore a timely and critical topic and the comments by Schneider et al. and Etzion offer some important forward-looking research questions.

The comment by Schneider et al. focuses on well-known tensions in corporate sustainability which are addressed in the literature cited in our paper. The authors emphasize the past record of specific types of TNCs in generating unsustainability and driving undesirable social outcomes and inequality to, in effect, oppose the proposition that TNCs could become active agents of systemic change towards sustainability.

Our analysis recognizes and documents the dominance of TNCs as a critical feature of the Anthropocene and highlights their disproportionate and unprecedented capacity to influence the biosphere. Yet our further contribution is to explore possible ways to leverage their influence to accelerate sustainability. Past track records in unsustainable practice are, we would argue, a starting point, not a limit, and as Etzion suggests, TNCs differ widely in their motivations, agency and effectiveness. Part of a forward-looking analysis needs to be on evidence for how sovereign governments can implement effective public policies and improve governmental regulations.

Etzion also points to critical empirical questions in this context, on how, and if, diversely motivated and constituted TNCs can contribute to change towards the Sustainable Development Goals. He emphasizes the diverse incentives that may apply to different sectors, and which actors in society and supply-chains can produce such incentives. In particular, the notion of identifying different TNC archetypes offers an exciting avenue for exploring the social, political, economic, ecological and equity dimensions of TNC dominance – and what to do about it.

Corporate leaders increasingly regard sustainability as key for their business and a chance for companies to add value and to access emerging markets. This presents both opportunities and risks. The opportunity is for the private sector to assume leadership, engage in more sustainable practices and contribute to just transitions. The risk is that companies define the sustainability agenda in a way that is convenient for their operations and legitimates self-regulations over national or international

rules, failing to address major social and environmental issues in their respective sectors, or falling short of delivering results in the absence of enforcement.

Our paper, and those by the commentators, represents an invitation for more research across scientific disciplines on how to engage with TNCs in ways that help meet the Sustainable Development Goals, and that ensure both transparent decision-making and improved regulation in the absence of stewardship.